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### About the Article

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## Filming Folktales: The 'Uncanny' in Bhaskar Hazarika's Kothanodi ("The River of Fables")

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### Abstract

The affinity between Assamese literature and cinema has only grown over the years since its inception in 1935; in the history of Assamese cinema, film adaptation had begun with Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's *Jyoti* and Padum Baruah's *Gonga Silonir Pakhi*. It is no surprise that Bhaskar Hazarika too turned towards the well-known collection of folktales *Burhi Air Sadhu* by Lakshminath Bezbaroa for the subject of his debut feature film *Kothanodi, The River of Fables* in 2015. Bezbaroa in the book mentions his views on folktales as markers of cultural identity of Assamese community and wanted his anthology to strengthen the feelings of Assamese nationalism among the people of the land. The paper proposes to reflect on this take of Bezbaroa on identity and culture, and go ahead to analyse the gaze of Bhaskar Hazarika as an auteur. With two successful feature films to his credit, the filmmaker is known for his depiction of the 'uncanny' (Freud) and horror to delve deep into the dark recesses of the mind, and society simultaneously. Whereas Bezbaroa's folktales have been regarded as bedtime stories for children, the paper would like to argue that the viewing of these tales in the film by young children evokes horror and dismay. The dialectical simulation of images created by the auteur resonates more with the adult minds as he offers the contours of his film-philosophy with an Amazonian cosmology.

**Keywords:** Assamese Folktales, Multinaturalist Perspectivism, Adaptation, Uncanny

It does not come as a surprise that Bhaskar Hazarika, the noted filmmaker from Assam has adapted four folktales from Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Grandma's Tales* for his debut feature *Kothanodi* in 2015. Adaptations in Assamese cinema has a long history; it had begun with Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's *Jyoti* (1935) and has continued ever since through the 1970s and 1980s in films like Padum Baruah's *Gonga Silonir Pakhi* (1976) or in Bhabendranth Saikia's films. Folk elements, short stories and novels have always inspired filmmakers. This paper instead of tracing such a history discusses analytically Bhaskar Hazarika's ways of adaptation, realism, and the liberty he exercises as an auteur to foreground his film-philosophy. An auteur-filmmaker stands apart from film directors and scriptwriters as a major creative force who is responsible for fundamental cinematic grammar like "camera placements, blocking, lighting, scene length rather than [focusing on] only the plot line or the theme" (Britannica). He would oversee all audio and visual elements of the motion picture and is like the author of the film and not only a scriptwriter. He is the camera-pen, *camera-stylo* (Britannica). In other words, these features create a distinct personal style and philosophy of the auteur in the film. The director of *Kothanodi* besides being the scriptwriter is also the creative force behind the film. He is primarily concerned with his vision of the world in cinematic images and is in control of every element of a mise-en-scene. With this, in view, the

paper attempts to explore the ways of filming the four Assamese folktales by the auteur and see if his film presents a simulacrum of reality.

Jean Baudrillard in his reference to postmodern culture and representation (Baudrillard, [Simulacra and Simulation], 1988) associated the third type in his list of simulacra to the postmodern age. For him there is a precession of simulacra, that is the representation precedes and determines the real. There is no longer any distinction between reality and its representation, there can only be the simulacra. We're so bombarded by clichés—television images, fantasies, cinema, social networks—that it is difficult to avoid them and therefore there is no original copy. According to Baudrillard postmodern culture is directed by models and maps and we have forgotten the prior reality that precedes maps. Reality itself is created by following certain maps or models.

The folktales can be regarded as the givens. Bhaskar Hazarika in the film attempts like a painter to clear the givens to dive deep into the recesses of the origin/past and rubs off models, maps and clichés. He has moved away from the simulacra to establish new forms of reality and moves towards the origins, towards the primordial phase. This reiterates Deleuze's observation in his *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (Deleuze, 1981/2017) when he writes on the ways a painter works:

... the painter does not have to cover a blank surface, but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it. He does not paint in order to reproduce on the canvas an object functioning as a model; he paints on images that are already there, in order to produce a canvas whose functioning will reverse the relations between model and copy. In short, what we have to define are all these "givens" [*donnees*] that are on the canvas before the painter's work begins, and determine, among these givens, which are an obstacle, which are a help, or even the effects of a preparatory work (Deleuze, 1981/2017, p. 61).

The themes and models offered by the folktales can be regarded as the givens and Bhaskar Hazarika in an attempt to clear models, maps and clichés has moved away from the simulacra to establish new ways of looking at reality and its representation. He goes deep into the origins and to the pre-model, pre-modern phase. He looks into the recesses of the past and in the folktales and beliefs rooted in the Assamese society to create a visual-philosophical projection of the uncanny and highlights a world of 'multinaturalist perspectivism' (2013), as offered by Viveros de Castro in his anthropological study of Amazonian communities.

## I

In an interview, quoted in *Scroll.in*, the director and scriptwriter of *Kothanodi*, Bhaskar Hazarika informs us of his desperate search for locales untouched by modern lifestyle which finally led him to the river island of Majuli (Ramnath, 2015, p. *Trending*). He decided to carry on with exploring the island as it promised a suitable setting for the thematic concerns of the film. Reaching there with the crew and equipment was not easy as they needed to be ferried to the island. However, despite the logistical constraints, it was a prerequisite for the theme and purpose of the film:

We eventually shot much of the film on the Majuli island, which increased our budget by five-six per cent. We had to hire barges to take our equipment across the river. It was worth it since we could show the island's full beauty. (Ramnath, 2015, p. *Trending*)

It proved to be a successful move as the island provided an idyllic rural locale for the folktales that explore a cosmology of both human and non-human assemblances and disruptions. Such specificities of a setting can be necessitated particularly for two reasons: firstly, his adaptation of four tales from *Burhi Air Sadhu*, the Assamese folktales collated by Lakshminath Bezbaroa and secondly, to explore the pre-modern thought and culture as different from the modern western binary culture. To begin with, as discussed in various essays and books the folktales or *Grandma's Tales* represent the cultural heritage of Assam: "It presents Assam as a land where such stories have existed for centuries; where man, nature and the paranormal are in a relationship and not always of the holy kind." (Ghosh, 2020, p. *Assamese Reviews*).

Lakshminath Bezbaroa is known as the doyen of Assamese literary and cultural Renaissance and is honoured by the literati of Assam with the title of *Sahityarathi*, "an epithet which is [used] rather in the epic and heroic vein like the heroes of the *Mahabharata* and *Illiad* (Chatterji, 2014, p. Cover). As noted by Bhaben Barua, "in the annual session of the Society held in 1891 over which Gunabhiram Barua presided, Bezbaroa, in his annual secretarial report, declared that it was one of the aims of the Society to discover the lines along which the Assamese mind ('*asamiya manuhor manasikota*) had evolved since the ancient times. In a later period Bezbaroa engaged himself in the pioneering task of the reconstruction of the past of Assam, that is, of an exposition of the three basic element of Assam's cultural heritage: (1) the folk tradition, (2) the religious tradition (3) the political history" (Barua, 2014, p. 32). He contributed to the folk tradition by collecting almost 70 Assamese folktales and in 1912 and 1913 published three volumes, namely, *Kaka Deuta Nati Lora*, *Burhi Air Sadhu* and *Junuka* in an attempt to develop Assamese identity, language and culture. However, his quest was for a "cultural synthesis, in which the Assamese people would discover their 'true voice of feeling'" (Barua, 2014, p. 35)

Folklores are traditional beliefs, customs and stories of a community passed on through generations orally by 'telling' them. It is common to all cultures and certain attributes of these tales transcend all cultures. Folklorists often like to differentiate the notions of myths, legends and folktales. Folktales are generally understood as the stories told at leisure to entertain "fireside tales, winter nights tales, nursery tales, coffee-house tales, sailor yarns, pilgrimage and caravan tales to pass the endless nights and days" (Campbell, 2002, p. 749). However Assamese folktales are called *sadhukatha* which according to Bezbaroa is a "moral tale or teaching of saints or virtuous people" (Nath, 2011, p. 216) which shows that the elders were concerned about imparting values and advice to the young minds through stories. The stories were told to excite their imagination and also aim at teaching a moral lesson. For him every community has their own set of distinctive folktales which represent the identity, culture and beliefs of the people: "Language and folktales are the bones and brains of a people. The Assamese call their language as *maat* and their folktales *sadhukatha*". He distinguishes *sadhukatha* as distinct from either Bengali or other tales but at the same time notes the tradition of telling tales orally in other parts of the world like Germany, Norway or France as well as in different parts of India. He shows how German scholars showed the world that "the history of an ancient tale or the history of a word was more valuable than the history of a big war" (qtd. in Nath, 2011, p. 214).

Often considered as bedtime stories for little children and young adults, these folktales serve as parables or an exemplum and a few are generally assumed to be apolitical. Bezbaroa mentions two kinds of tales: one that is didactic like *Panchatantra* and the other as a means to entertain "by

giving full reign to the imagination" (Nath, 2011, p. 214), simultaneously acknowledging how these tales can also be used to understand the community's knowledge systems. Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned that some Assamese folktales also attempt at exposing larger social issues of the hierarchy of class, caste and gender. This is made possible due to the close involvement of the community in 'telling stories'. Their participation influences the themes and characterisations of the tales:

Folktales originate, grow, and are circulated among the people, and hence, the issues that affect the people get to be represented in the tales in various ways. In the old age when these tales took shape, the oppression of the kings, the tyranny of the priests and superstition among the people, for instance, were realities with which everyone was acquainted. Consequently, many of our tales voice concern over or present criticism of such issues. (Nath, 2011, p. 17)

The adaptation of these folktales, in that sense, can no longer remain innocent or only didactic in films like *Kothanodi*. Bhaskar Hazarika in his indebtedness to Bezbaroa has referred to four folktales entitled *Champawati*, *Tejimola*, *Ou Kuwari* (Elephant Apple Princess) and *Tawoir Sadhu* ("The Story of Tawoi"). The credit section in the film informs of his adaptation of events and characters from the tales in his film. As an auteur, he takes the liberty to re-read the tales and allow a new interpretation of the tales which he thinks may not be liked socially in Assam. His audio-visual medium presents the stories as more complex and darker than Bezbaroa's tales. The bedtime stories of Bezbaroa's collection mainly written for young readers no longer remained so in the films. It gets disconcertingly haunting with the filming of a chain of signifiers evoking mystery, disbelief and fear. In this, he is influenced by Japanese horror movies such as *Onibaba* and *Kwaidan* (Ramnath, 2015, p. *Trending*). The visuals on screen are matched by eerie music and wailing sounds. Cinema which is considered a movement of images, engages in a philosophy that the director and scriptwriter use to draw on a worldview different from the western binary culture and its anthropocentrism.

## II

"This is my cultural heritage and I can take liberties with it. I like stories that are dark and macabre, and I changed the endings – for instance, the original elephant apple story is about a king and his seven queens, one of whom gives birth to the fruit. I made the story about common people" (Ramnath, 2015, p. *Trending*).

The above statement made by the director and the scriptwriter (auteur) is crucial to understanding his views on adaptation and how he brings in changes by subverting the treatment of theme and characterisation. Unlike most of the reviews which state that the film apart from everything else is bedtime stories, this paper argues that the film, *Kothanodi*, transforms the bedtime stories of *Grandma's Tales* into horror folktales. It follows a sequence of images which are dark, macabre and (what Freud terms as) 'uncanny'. It presents a chain of signifiers of familiar things in such a way that they appear as strange. The uncanny and the strange for the viewer at first evokes a sense of disbelief and awe as they tend to approach the tales as bedtime stories for children.

Most of the young audience and adults during their childhood have grown up listening to the tales of *Champawati* or *Tejimola*. *Tejimola* had been a popular tale with flat characterisation, for

instance, the cruel stepmother, and young daughter in distress similar to the characterisation of the popular fairy-tale *Cinderella*. But instead of fairy Godmothers and witches with brooms, the folktales of Assam portray stock characters, river-crossings and transformations. Bhaskar Hazarika spoke on the responses of the audience globally to his film and mentioned this aspect:

“There is a certain universality about folk tales, in that every culture in the world has folktale [myth or fairytales]. Some elements are common throughout, for instance the wicked stepmother. In my opinion, audiences around the world, in countries as diverse as South Korea and Sweden, have connected with the film for this reason” (Prabalika, 2015, p. *Assamese Film*)

One of the adapted tales is *Ow-Kuwori (The Elephant Apple Princess)*. The book, *Grandma's Tales* mentions two pregnant queens. The older queen gives birth to a boy while the younger one to an *outenga*, elephant apple that would follow her everywhere like a child. The beautiful princess hidden inside the fruit would come out while bathing in the river, and one day a prince saw her and fell in love with her. He married her and later on the advice of a beggar woman could manage to get her out of the elephant apple. Bhaskar Hazarika adapts this story with characters from rural societies to address contemporary issues faced by ordinary women and expose social evils like witchcraft. He depicts how society judges women according to their conventional roles and norms. Instead of royalty, his protagonist is a rural woman, a *kajee* who gives birth to an *outenga*. Consequently, she is thrown out of her house by her husband as she fails to produce human babies. She walks away with her roll of clothes, crosses the river and starts living in the fringes as an outsider. Due to the *outenga* that follows her everywhere and also swims across the river to be with her, the villagers mock her and think of her to be a witch, a *daini*. This highlights the marginalisation and numerous crimes committed against her in rural Assam. The film highlights a socially relevant feminist concern in Assam even today.

The *outenga* follows her as she leaves her husband's house, crosses the river and stays with her in the *chang ghar*. No prince turns up for its rescue. It happens to be a traveller (Adil Hussain) who sympathises with her and tries to solve the mystery of the fruit. As a traveller who had seen distant lands, he tells stories of other unusual incidents: “A woman gave birth to a kitten in Sadiya [...] a bird had raised a woman; A girl was hatched out of a duck's egg one morning.” (*Kothanodi*) Although he tried his best to explain and find out the truth of the *outenga*, he had to leave for some time as it disturbed the dyad of the mother and the child *outenga*. The traveller could rescue the mother only when she expresses her affection and displayed her ability to understand the other's position. She prepares food for it and discovers one night how the baby comes out of her shell to eat. The child's externalization is filmed in creepy images showing how the limbs begin to emerge out of the basket at night and reveal herself as a fully grown girl-child; as she begins enjoying her food, the traveller sneaks in and burns the *outenga* shell liberating the child. Although relieved, the woman continues to live in her house, a *chang-ghar* indicating a new equilibrium but the end never resolves the issues of social evil. No moral lesson is drawn out of the ending of her story as the camera freezes briefly on her and the child from the back as they keep looking at the way ahead.

Initially, she tries to avoid the rolling *outenga* that follows her and wanted to leave it on the shore as she quickly crossed the river on a boat. Later, the auteur through the visuals on the screen

shows her growing attachment to the point when she starts to communicate and feel its thoughts. Her affinity towards the fruit grows gradually. This feeling of affinity is analogous to Viveros De Castro's notion of "affinity" (Assy, 2021, YouTube) in which the other is both a trusted friend and also a potential enemy. In this case it is for the fruit that she had to leave her home, husband and live like a freak. The fruit is given a consciousness. The song of the *outenga*, "*Outenga's Lament*" establishes the perspective of a fruit, a non-human object in search of love. It is able to comprehend and feel the human mother's problems. Here speciesism seems to be in question as the story begins to challenge anthropocentric attributes. The human characters in the film find the *outenga* weird and see it as a mystery whereas the *outenga* could understand human language. The initial fear of the mother in seeing the movement of the inanimate object is replaced by a new equilibrium into the mother's life when she would talk to the *outenga*, and also take care of it. A woman shunned by her fellow beings is received by the *outenga*. Instead of the love story of prince and princesses Bhaskar Hazarika constructs his film philosophy in his treatment of the theme. He presents a world inhabited by both human and the non-human, be it fruit, plants or animals. The child *outenga* is not only unbelievable but also haunting for children and young adults.

The woman walks towards her house in broad daylight and the disruption continues with the movement of an inanimate object for the viewer. It evokes the uncanny for the fruit is a common everyday fruit for the people of Assam and is part of Assamese culinary identity. This familiar fruit has been given a strange attribute that entails mockery and the loss of her home. The village boys tease her as she passes them in silence. The image of the moving *outenga* is introduced after the expository scene of the *Tawoi* tale where the father buries new-born infants in his backyard.

Considering the model offered by Todorov, each tale in the film starts at 'disruption' and this pattern runs parallelly for all the four folktales chosen by Bhaskar Hazarika. The non-linear plots on the surface seem to be propelled by the social conventions, beliefs, taboos or step-mother archetypes whereas it seems to be determined by the auteur's principal focalization at disruption and exploration of the uncanniness of the familiar sites and objects. The music and sound in the film add to this intent and the music director Amarnath Hazarika has successfully woven the folk music from the collection of songs by Padma Shri Birendranath Datta and Ramen Choudhury into the fabric of *Kothanodi*, and the result is a horror folk narrative that grows more intense with sound effects.

Freud's theory of the uncanny comes from the word *unheimlich* which is the opposite of the German word *heimlich* meaning familiar, native, belonging to home (Freud, 1919, p. 2). We generally tend to conclude that "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it "undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror" (ibid). Freud subverts this notion and argues how it resides in the familiar and shows how an auteur or a storyteller can trick us by shaping the narrative differently out of his realism simultaneously making us believe his social concerns:

The storyteller has this license among many others, that he can select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in particulars he pleases [for instance in fairy-tales]. We accept his ruling in every case. (Freud, 1919, p.18)

Hence for Freud a fairy-tale with dragons, witches, curses do not bring uncanniness since we accept its fantastical realm and locale from the very first. Uncanny experience fails in such settings and “The situation alters as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality”, takes advantage of our credulity and deceives us by “giving us sober truth. And slowly oversteps the bounds of possibility” (ibid.). Bhaskar Hazarika takes this opportunity to play with our imagination by showing us familiar settings, and not taking us to distant magic lands or worlds of prince and princess, in which he slowly moves into the eerie signifiers because horrors issue out of a signifying system and here it is through significant non-human entities, music and cinematography.

By dwelling on the rural pre-modern setting, he populates this space with common characters of the step-mother, the travelling father, the lonely woman, innocent daughters, landlords, priests, village boys, workers in the house of the landlords, secret lovers, fisherman found in every village in Assam. The familiar backyard or the bedroom turns into a site of horror and death. In the *Tawoi* story, a long shot follows a damp, semi-dark scene with drops of rain pouring on everything possible backed by unnerving music and the wailing of a child reveals infanticide. Here the cinematographer plays with the imaginations of the viewer by alternating long shots and close shots on the face of the father who does the digging to bury his newborn alive. The anxious look and guilt in his eyes is exposed by the camera. The repetition of this scene makes it more horrifying and by the time the mother resists we, as the audience, experience the relief needed right from the beginning as the familiar backyard of the house is used by the father (Kapil Bora) to bury his male babies on the advice of his uncle. As noted in the review by Sankhayan Ghosh “in the story about the married couple who have been sacrificing their new-borns, when it is revealed that the uncle is not an evil man after all and has been their protector all along, it affirms the shamanistic practice that had led to the sacrifice of newborns” (Ghosh, 2020, p. *Assamese Reviews*). Another scene shows the slimy and muddy heads of the dead babies coming out of the ground at night to reveal their intention of patricide and deceit as they talk to the parents. The climax is reached in conflict with this belief as the mother resists the burial of the fourth baby who happens to be a girl. The auteur here complicates the ethical question of killing the babies and hence, blurs the borders separating good from evil: the resistance is placed against the bizarre act of infanticide which turns out to be a shamanistic ritual.

Along with the everyday character, the filmmaker takes us to the world of plants and animals like the references to the python that marries *Champawati* or *outenga* and supplies them with perspectives as they display the ability to think and communicate. They take up subject positions and are given agencies to not only influence the plot but also the lives of the human characters. They think of themselves as humans in their habitat reiterating what Viveros de Castro explains about the point of view of Amazonian indigenous people:

Perspectivism is the pre-supposition that each living species is human in its own department, human for itself (humano para), or better, that everything is human for itself (todo para si e humano) or anthropogenic. This idea originates in the indigeneous cosmogonies, where the primordial form of the being is human. (Bravo, 2013, p. E-Misferica)



His writings offer the theory of 'multinaturalist perspectivism' as opposed to multiculturalism or anthropocentrism. It is a "vision of the world with a strong connection to "multinaturalism", a category opposed to multiculturalism that assumes the coexistence of different 'natures' as in Amazonian cosmology" (ibid.). These "natures include non-human animal perception along with a human one, all of them sharing a common perspective or affinity" (qtd. in Bravo, 2013, p. E-Misferica). With this notion, de Castro challenges the history of Western science or anthropology which for him has only one species, the human, who produces knowledge of the rest of the sub-species. The discovery of the Multinaturalist perspective leads to the conceptual position of a "non-anthropocentric virtuality about the idea of species" (ibid.). It is a doctrine that can be explicitly elaborated in shamanism and native mythologies that has the potential to imagine "all inter-species differences as a horizontal extension, analogic or metonymic, of intra-species differences"(ibid.). This notion dismantles the vertical hierarchy of the human and man and ceases to appear separate because in this perspective all the species-specific differences appear as modalities of the human. This does not allow humans to feel special or superior. In other words, all have the same essence or culture, but the natures are different. Human has all man and other species and the "form from which all species emerge: each of the species is a finite mode of a humanity as universal substance" (Bravo, 2013, p. E-Misferica) where every object is a subject with a point of view.

Hence the difference between species is not a difference of culture but of nature due to the experience of the type of body; it is a difference where each species is experienced by others, i.e., "as a body, as a collection of affections that are vulnerable to the senses, of capacities for modifying and being modified by agents of other species. The point of view is in the body...all human share the same culture—human culture" (Bravo, 2013, p. E-Misferica) and the human includes in Amazonian cosmology human beings, plants and animals or even artifacts.

### III

As we attune ourselves to our expectations of innocent bedtime stories and become passive receivers, the director acts upon us and seizes the situation to create horror in simple common realities of the village. He tricks our emotions in response to the images of the uncanny and horror unlike most reviews of *Kothanodi* in trying to see the film as bedtime stories: "The best part of *Kothanodi* is that in spite of its socially relevant themes, it never loses sight of its primary nature as a bedtime yarn" (Ghosh, 2020, p. *Assamese Reviews*). In the story of *Champawati*, the plot again follows a non-linear pattern and begins with the capturing of the python for the marriage of the second daughter from the forest unlike *Champawati*'s snake-husband who came to her on his own. The focalization again is not on an equilibrium but on the uncanny. The python is carried to the house and at night, it is fed with ducks by the landlady, the matriarch who in her greed for jewellery has decided to marry off her daughter to a python from the forest. The images move from the dark forest to the bedroom which is transformed into a site of horror and death on the wedding night. The silence of the matriarch at the tragedy of losing her young daughter, who eventually is swallowed by the wild python, and the image of the hand-pulled out of the reptile by dissecting its skin in an extreme close shot is bizarre and does not overtly offer moral lessons on greed and jealousy. The images that linger are of terrible shots of dissection and a gory hand wearing a bangle signifying the loss of jewellery for the matriarch.

The depiction of terrible matriarchs is epitomised in the story of *Tejimola* which narrates a torture tale of a step-mother who murders her step-daughter by crushing her limbs and head. When she was alive, the stepmother would make her eat scorpions as punishment for no apparent reason. The story ends with the burial of dead *Tejimola* the daughter of the traveller in the front courtyard and soon a plant grows out on that spot. The film ends with this scene where the matriarch is terrified to see the growth of the plant, a communion of *Tejimola* and plant life. It is projected as the ability to be something else which is the idea of metamorphosis in Perspectivism where one develops mutuality and concern but differs in the body. The non-human python of *Champawati*, the *outenga*, the dead baby-heads and the plant are given conscious intentionality which gather agency to say and express a point of view echoing the Amazonian worldview as noted by Viveiros de Castro in his explanation of his theory of multinaturalist perspectivism. With these images, the film ends without a peaceful balance and, questions of ethics and justice are deferred leaving its receptors unsatisfied and contemplating.

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